



Review: [Untitled]

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Tristana by Luis Buñuel

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Reviews

TRISTANA

Directed by Luis Buñuel. Script by Buñuel and Julie Alejandro, based on the novel by Benito Perez Galdos. Photography: Jose Aguayo. Maron Films.

On the surface, *Tristana* is about a pure young girl who is seduced by her guardian. It takes place in Toledo, Spain, long a stronghold of the double standard guaranteeing the man sexual license and the woman the choice of falling from grace or repressing her sexuality beneath a guise of sanctimonious innocence. Most of the women in Tristana's world choose the latter; she, however, has courage enough to flee from the house of her guardian, Don Lope, who calls himself her father or husband, "whichever I choose." She elopes with a handsome young artist who wishes to marry her. Two years later, still unmarried and afflicted with what seems to be a fatal illness, Tristana returns to the house of the guardian she despises. Bearing for the rest of her life the mark of her illness, an amputated leg, she murders Don Lope years later by allowing him to die of a heart attack without calling a doctor.

But within the confines of this rather melodramatic if morally resonant plot, which always borders on the perverse, as do all of the director's films, Buñuel has managed to interweave meanings that go far beyond the Electra theme. Throughout the film, Buñuel comments on the psychological effects of social dependence. Tristana quickly hates Don Lope because he watches her every move and refuses to allow her even to go for a walk unless she is in the company of the maid, Saturna. As the film begins, over the credits church bells peal, enclosing within their power the two women in black, Tristana and Saturna, who walk toward the camera. The church bells represent the authority of the male over the female in patriarchal Spain. Left an orphan by the death of her mother, Tristana is at the mercy of Don Lope. That no man is to be trusted by a woman

is expressed in Saturna's first words in the film which are a confirmation of the injustices suffered by her sex: "May my dead husband rot in hell."

Don Lope is the "good man" of his time, a liberal aristocrat. Yet when we first see him, he is soliciting a vivacious girl on the street. His overwhelming concern with matters of honor and morality does not pertain to his amorous relations with women. Don Lope strips Tristana of all her possessions except a few musical scores, and of her ideas as well. "I'll manage to clear your head of superstitions," he tells her at this first meeting. Her mother (who was also his lover), he asserts, "had no brains." Later, Tristana begins to have the nightmare that will pursue her throughout her life: she sees the head of Don Lope transferred into the phallic bell clapper at the church tower. This terrifying image of the ghoulish head of Don Lope represents at once her desire and repulsion for the lascivious, aging guardian. Tristana's fear of him is the fear of being smothered, her identity obliterated both psychologically and sexually. It is a fear confirmed by the authoritarianism of the man. "The only way to keep a woman honest," says Don Lope, quoting a Spanish folk saying, "is to break her leg and keep her at home," a prophecy of what will happen to Tristana.

Buñuel carefully develops the means by which Don Lope molds and shapes the young Tristana's mind to conform to his own plan to make her his life-long dependent. Out for a promenade, they see a young couple, and Don Lope sneers: "the sickly odor of marital bliss." Marriage, he tells Tristana, means a farewell to love; for love to be free, no official blessings should intervene. By seeming to allow her total freedom, Don Lope hopes to bind her to him in more subtle and binding ways than the legal. Only apparently sceptical, Tristana, whose goals are to be "free" and "to work," absorbs the lesson.

Buñuel's psychology is impeccable. Her mind a *tabula rasa*, it is logical that Tristana would become whatever her surroundings provide,

that her psychic impulses would be directed by the will of her domineering guardian. The teachings of Don Lope prove to be deadly for both. By having Tristana persistently refuse to marry her young artist lover, Don Horacio, Buñuel illustrates how deeply the unconscious of Tristana has accepted Don Lope's half-baked notions about "free love." But this in turn increases her dependence upon Don Lope himself, filling her with a despair and self-hatred that culminates in his murder. Cleverly, Don Lope kisses Tristana for the first time right after he has spoken against marriage. Her defenses weakened, she with a giggle admits that she does indeed care for him.

Ultimately, this dependency leads her to become simply perverse. She takes delight in the presence of the half-witted, deafmute son of Saturna who at the end pushes her wheelchair for her because he is dependent upon *her*. She shuts him out of her room only to expose her body to him gloatingly from the balcony. Like Don Lope, Tristana needs a victim. As Saturno rushes off into the bushes, the boy provides an analogue for Tristana's own youthful reaction to the aging Don Lope with its simultaneous fascination and repulsion.

Sexually, Tristana, after her initiation by Don Lope, becomes the sister of Belle de Jour. It is no accident that both parts are played by Catherine Deneuve, whose perfect blond beauty has the quality of ice, of emotion repressed, a trait utilized as well by François Truffaut in *La Sirène du Mississippi*. Like Belle de Jour, Tristana is a woman whose sexuality has been perverted by a fear of seduction, by an older, forbidding father figure, and who can now respond only to the brutal and the perverse. Thus Tristana leaves her young lover to return to the sombre house of Don Lope.

The archaic, gradually decaying quality of Don Lope's world is expressed in the golds and browns, the colors of autumn, which dominate the *mise en scène*. This mood is enhanced by Deneuve's being dressed throughout the film only in combinations of brown, white and

black, reflecting a sensibility tamed by the norms of its world. Toledo's narrow winding medieval streets provide a real labyrinth to echo Tristana's unconscious imprisonment. (A panorama of Toledo both opens and closes the film.)

Tristana's tie with the force that corrupted her is epitomized by her return to the house of Don Lope. It is the force of his repulsive-attractive presence upon her sexuality, the equivalent of the desire of the daughter for her father. Don Horacio is logically repelled by Tristana's perversity, expressed in her refusal to marry him and her rejection of his love for that of Don Lope. In alliance with the corrupt and the unnatural are the priests who describe Tristana's refusal to marry Don Lope as "irrationality" and who would legalize her psychological, social, and sexual imprisonment.

Until the fantasized wish-fulfillment at the end, the murder of the oppressive father-lover, the hatred of Tristana for Don Lope can express itself only in the small victories of the oppressed. She toys with and then devours two testicle-like chick peas. She throws in the trash his moth-eaten carpet slippers, for which he has a more than rational attachment. The final expression of her perversity is her gesture at the end of the film of opening the window and letting the snow and cold engulf the dying Don Lope. For the perverse in the world of Don Lope has always been treated as the natural. (He even tells her that she would be more appealing to some people with her amputated leg.) He is delighted with the conjunction between her return to absolute dependence as a cripple and his lifelong perverse feelings toward the sexual and women. It is, of course, perfect justice that Don Lope should fall victim at the end to his own perversion. Tristana responds in the manner he has taught her. "The kinder he is," she says, "the less I love him." She expresses the psychological damage done to women in her culture—the same damage expressed by Belle de Jour, who could be awakened sexually only in a brothel.

Tristana reflects as well Buñuel's preoccupa-



TRISTANA

tion with the decay of Spain. He explores its obsession with an old order, represented by Don Lope and his cronies who meet every day in a café filled with indolent former aristocrats. It is a world defined by norms and relationships which have outlived their time and have now becomes dangerous. *Tristana* takes place in the twenties after the fall of the first republic which presaged the invasion of the fascists in the next decade. It conveys the image of a Spain that is already amputated. The crippled Tristana represents in her person the generation to be maimed by the Civil War, embodying as she does the frequent image in Franco's Spain of the amputee.

Buñuel creates an image of the defeat of liberty. In one scene workers are being chased by some Guardia Civil on horseback while others pursue them with swords. The precarious existence of the worker, the man on the street, is meant to be viewed in opposition to Don Lope's impotent reactions to the horror of work. While the men in the machine shop from which Saturno runs away must work long hours, Don Lope is free to decide to live in genteel poverty until the death of his wealthy sister, Josefina. Don Lope's attitude toward the workers reveals the self-righteous *noblesse oblige* of the aristocrat. Pointing the police in another direction, he allows a thief to escape because "he was weak and needed protection . . . the police

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stand for power." His gesture on behalf of "justice" is, characteristically, an act in which he does not have to participate. For Don Lope "money is vile"; for the workers in the metal shop, on the streets, and omnipresent in the scenario, it means survival. Buñuel clinches the decadence of Don Lope by rapidly cutting from Don Lope and Tristana going to bed for the first time to the scene of the police chasing workers down the street.

Don Lope stands thus for the impotence and historical amnesia of Spain, a role defined as well by Carlos Saura in *The Garden of Delights* through the character of Antonio. And Don Lope's impotence is far from innocent. Hypocrisy defines his very sensibility. It is expressed in his self-conscious and superficial rejection of religion as well as in the ridiculousness of his code of honor which decrees that he live by all the ten commandments except those having to do with sex, by which he means seduction. Don Lope has the arrogance to argue that he takes a girl only if she consents. He proudly maintains that he would exclude the wife of a friend or "the flower blooming in innocence." With no dialogue needed, Buñuel cuts to the innocent Tristana reading musical scores, soon to be the victim of Don Lope's lust.

Don Lope refuses to judge a duel because the participants have agreed to fight only "until the first sign of blood," and he hates "circuses." He won't be the arbiter at so cheap a price. His morality is thus expressed in limbo, devoid of any real content. It is couched in terms that will not touch upon his life: a duel, a harmless denunciation of priests, the contempt for the degradation of work by a man who is kept all his life by a private income, the rejection of marriage by a man who savors sex more with a mistress, particularly if she is innocent and thirty years younger than he. It is the almost psychotic sense of honor of the hidalgo who would rather starve to death than work, although he must sell everything he owns. In Don Lope's case it is the honor of a man who has debauched a girl destined to live with him as his daughter.

The essential frivolity of such a code, the hypocrisy of a morality which exacts no sacrifices, is nowhere better expressed than in one of the last sequences of the film in which the now aged Don Lope, bespectacled and grey, with his beard no longer dyed black, has coffee with three grasping priests on the eve of his death. The priests are waiting in eager anticipation for his death, which they hope will mean bequests to them. They savor his rich, creamy coffee and cakes, stuffing themselves as snow falls outside the window. Taking shelter with the rich, they are shielded from the harsh aspects of life. Don Lope has forgotten his atheism, his heretical cry, "long live the living," after the funeral of the intractable dowager, his sister Josefina. He has forgotten that he refused to call a priest when Tristana was deathly ill on the ground that "the only true priests are those who defend the innocent." After Tristana returns to the house where she was dishonored, ironically but with precise realism, the priests return also. They have been enlisted to convince Tristana to marry Don Lope and end her life of "sin."

Nowhere is the "honor" of Don Lope better satirized than in Buñuel's cutting back to Tristana's days of innocence, before she entered the house of Don Lope. The film ends on the image it began with: the innocent Tristana walking pleasantly with Saturna, beautifully under-played by Lola Gaos. The repetition of the view of Toledo now expresses the world which has buried her. The resounding church bells are no longer nostalgic but painful symbols of hypocrisy.

Spain, like Tristana, its "sadness," has been destroyed by a cruel code of honor, defiled and left amputated by hypocrisy. And it can summon nothing with which to replace the old code. Tristana is left in the house (Spain) of Don Lope with no new values to heal and revitalize her internal and external habitation. *Tristana* belongs with *Belle de Jour* in the Buñuel oeuvre. It is post-*Viridiana* and post-*Nazarin* in its sensibility, refusing even the illusion of a messianic figure equivalent to Viridi-

ana, Nazarin or Simon of the Desert come to heal the poor. The political has been transformed back into the sociology of a callous aristocracy struggling with its death throes in an unrelieved homeland. Buñuel no longer can offer the deception of the character with Christian impulses whose hopes will come to nothing because his dedication to the poor as a single individual is painfully inadequate. The religious motif appears now only in burlesque, in the begging priests hovering around Don Lope on the eve of his death.

Tristana briefly shares the innocent hope of a figure like Viridiana, but she is too soon engulfed by a world which denies a woman any outlet for her creative energies. Tristana must sell her beloved piano soon after her mother's death, and it is only after her leg is amputated, when she is once more under his reign, that Don Lope buys her a new one. By this time Tristana sees her amputation as defining her condition and her future. Paradoxically, although he does not live to see it, Don Lope was right when he demonically said that the sick Tristana would never leave his house alive. Her loud piano playing during the last visit of Don Horacio is symbolic of her repression of all healthy impulse. Transforming tender feeling into harsh aggression, it is meant to drown out what remains in her of hope and possibility. Don Horacio, as Tristana guesses, will never return. She is left amidst the furniture of decadence to live out her future. Her youthful sexuality has been reduced to a semi-demented exhibitionism before the frightened deafmute, Saturno.

The circular structure of the imagery, the rapid repetition of the images of Tristana's life until we return to the first sequence of the film, reflects the hopelessness Buñuel feels, both toward Spain and toward its victims. Buñuel has relentlessly and brilliantly exposed the destruction of the individual by a corrupt, hypocritical moral code which makes no pretense of improving a society in which class animosities are deepening and brutality is growing.—JOAN MELLEEN